Attacks on Australian university jobs deepen but union boasts it is “stronger”

Mike Head
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Over recent weeks, a “second wave” of job cuts and course closures has hit university workers and students around Australia, on top of the unprecedented destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, especially casual positions, in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite widespread hostility to the assault, reflected in protest rallies by staff and students at many campuses, the attacks are continually deepening, assisted by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which is isolating each struggle and opposing any national industrial action to halt the assault.

Humanities, arts and language courses are among the worst-affected, adding to the intellectual and cultural impact of the offensive being conducted by the federal government and university managements. This restructuring is further transforming the 39 public universities into corporatised facilities for churning out “job ready” graduates to serve the needs of the corporate elite.

Melbourne’s Swinburne University, for instance, is planning to abolish all three of its language departments—Japanese, Chinese and Italian—with immediate effect. Various language programs are being axed also at La Trobe, Murdoch and Western Sydney University.

Among the job losses announced over the past month alone, the Australian National University has declared it “will require a further reduction of 215 positions,” following 250 voluntary separations, and hundreds of fixed-term and casual staff losing work.

At the University of Technology Sydney, the management has announced a new round of forced redundancies, after more than 350 staff recently took voluntary redundancies.

A “Hunger Games” style “spill and fill” was unveiled at the University of Queensland’s architecture school, compelling 20 academics to compete with each other for 18 positions to match “a new operating model and academic profile.”

That followed a similar “spill and fill” demand at the University of Sydney’s learning centre and medical science departments, on top of about 250 “voluntary” redundancies across that university.

At the Australian Catholic University, the executive is using the pandemic as an excuse to retrench 200 or more staff and cancel an agreed pay rise.

Department-by-department, Western Sydney University has rolled out 36 “change proposals” that are estimated to total more than 200 job losses. These include forced redundancies, despite the NTEU having claimed to have secured a management pledge of no forced retrenchments during 2020.

Developments at Sydney’s Macquarie University are an early warning of even deeper cuts to come in 2021, as the global pandemic continues to resurge due to the profit-driven economic “reopening” decisions of governments, and as the impact worsens on international students.

On December 8, Macquarie’s vice chancellor issued a new call for “voluntary” redundancies by academics, with applications to close on December 31. This will be followed by “change proposals” across the university, with academics in mathematics already told that one in six of their jobs must go, and that they must compete with each other to determine who remains.

Such brutal proposals are only possible because of the role of the NTEU in blocking resistance. In fact, judging by its 2019–20 annual report, recently published on its website, the union leadership is proud of its achievement in presiding over job losses on a scale never seen before in the country’s universities.

NTEU national president Alison Barnes wrote that 12,695 “of our workmates” were now “standing in unemployment lines across the country.” She said that was a “gross underestimate of the real numbers of staff across our sector who have lost work.” It did not capture those working for private education providers or “the many thousands of casuals who have silently been let go.”

Two months earlier, Barnes conceded that up to 90,000 jobs had been destroyed.

Yet, in her annual report message, Barnes said it had been a successful year for the NTEU. “Indeed, the Union has grown even stronger,” she insisted. “The ongoing crisis in higher education” forced the union to focus on its priorities of “building our workplace structures, increasing our workplace density, and strengthening our power.”

Barnes’s claim of greater strength, amid the job carnage, underscores the central preoccupation of the NTEU, like all trade unions. That is to shore up its position as a policing

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agency, imposing the demands of the ruling capitalist class and its administrators.

Likewise, Barnes declared that the union had not been "deterred in the broader fight" by the failure of its months-long parliamentary lobbying and petitioning campaign against the Liberal-National government's "job ready graduates" legislation to cut funding and hike fees for humanities students.

In her account of this political debacle, Barnes said NTEU members "stood united" and won the support of "the Australian Labor Party, the Greens, and [right-wing independent] Senators Patrick and Lambie," as well as "peak unions bodies across the country who emailed their constituents and sought to amplify our message." Nevertheless, the legislation had passed.

As this political line-up demonstrates, the entire campaign was intended to divert the outrage of educators and students back into the dead-end of the parliamentary arena. The NTEU specifically peddled illusions in Labor and the Greens, even though the last Greens-backed Labor government imposed the market-driven "education revolution" that laid the foundations for the ongoing offensive on university workers and students.

In his annual report contribution, NTEU national secretary Matthew McGowan boasted that the union's membership had risen, at least in the first half of 2020, despite the immense job losses. He admitted that much of this increase was due to free three-month memberships offered to casuals. Many of those casuals may have joined up on the promise that the NTEU would defend their jobs, only to have those hopes quickly dashed.

McGowan again defended the NTEU's "Job Protection Framework," which the union had to abandon in May after a membership rebellion against its offer of wage cuts of up to 15 percent, which led most university managements to conclude that the union could not reliably deliver such sacrifices.

McGowan crowed that the NTEU had nevertheless been able to push through versions of the framework at eight universities—Monash, La Trobe, the University of Western Australia, Queensland University of Technology, Western Sydney University, the University of Tasmania, Wollongong and Adelaide.

With other "Union negotiated variations" to enterprise agreements, McGowan claimed that the NTEU had saved 1,500 jobs. But he provided no details, nor any information about the cuts to wages and conditions that were involved.

Other sections of the annual report provided a partial picture of what the NTEU's activities actually achieved. The Victorian Division reported that the union "secured a Jobs Protection Framework at La Trobe." However, "La Trobe University continues to struggle financially and recently announced 400 redundancies."

The end result was little different at Deakin University. It "was the first to pursue 400 forced redundancies with no option for voluntary redundancies," accompanied "by a major restructure." McGowan said the "NTEU successfully prosecuted Deakin management in the Fair Work Commission for their failure to appropriately consult with the NTEU and staff. Unfortunately, improved consultation did not abate management's plans."

In all its handiwork, the NTEU is being assisted by the pseudo-left groups that falsely claim to be socialist, such as Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity. They echo Barnes and McGowan in urging university workers to "build the union."

That means to shore up the union apparatus that is blocking any unified fight against the job loss tsunami. These groups are following in the footsteps of their earlier members, such as Barnes and New South Wales NTEU secretary Michael Thomson, who are today celebrating their "achievements" while suppressing resistance to the onslaught on jobs and conditions.

The Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education are continuing to seek to clarify the key political issues arising from these bitter experiences. We are urging university workers and students to draw the essential conclusion—the need to form genuine new working class organisations, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the trade unions.

These committees would seek to organise a nationwide, unified struggle for secure well-paid jobs and basic rights, protect staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and link up with educators nationally and internationally who are facing similar critical struggles.

That requires challenging the dictates of the capitalist profit system and turning to a revolutionary socialist perspective based on the working class taking power in order to totally reorganise society in the interests of all, instead of the financial elite.

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